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STUDY
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PLAYING TO WIN IN NICARAGUA

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL WILLIAM P. MARTINOUS

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30 MARCH 1988



U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE, CARLISLE BARRACKS, PA 17013-5050

Unclassified

SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE (When Data Entered)

A192 42.0

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE		READ INSTRUCTIONS BEFORE COMPLETING FORM
1. REPORT NUMBER	2. GOVT ACCESSION NO.	3. RECIPIENT'S CATALOG NUMBER
4. TITLE (and Subtitle) Playing to Win in Nicaragua		5. TYPE OF REPORT & PERIOD COVERED
		6. PERFORMING ORG. REPORT NUMBER
7. AUTHOR(s) LTC William P. Martinous		8. CONTRACT OR GRANT NUMBER(s)
9. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS U.S. Army War College Carlisle Barracks, PA 17013-5050		10. PROGRAM ELEMENT, PROJECT, TASK AREA & WORK UNIT NUMBERS
11. CONTROLLING OFFICE NAME AND ADDRESS Same		12. REPORT DATE 30 March 1988
		13. NUMBER OF PAGES 25
14. MONITORING AGENCY NAME & ADDRESS (if different from Controlling Office)		15. SECURITY CLASS. (of this report) Unclassified
		15a. DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE
16. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of this Report) Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited.		
17. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of the abstract entered in Block 20, if different from Report)		
18. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES		
19. KEY WORDS (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)		
20. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number) The United States' objective in Nicaragua was the establishment of a democratic, pluralistic, stable and friendly government. What developed was the Sandinista regime, a Marxist totalitarian junta, hostile towards the United States and its interests. Now the United States is groping for a strategy to reverse past failures and achieve its original objective. This paper seeks to help in the search for that counter-strategy. It reviews the recent history of Nicaragua and identifies a need for a long-term, national commitment to counter		

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Unclassified

SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE (When Data Entered)

Unclassified

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Block 20. Abstract (cont)

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Unclassified

SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE(When Data Entered)

USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM PAPER

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PLAYING TO WIN IN NICARAGUA

An Individual Study Project
Intended for Publication

by

Lieutenant Colonel William P. Martinous

Colonel John D. Waghelstein, IN
Project Adviser



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U.S. Army War College
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania 17013
30 March 1988

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DTIC TAB	<input type="checkbox"/>
Unannounced	<input type="checkbox"/>
Justification _____	
By _____	
Distribution/ _____	
Availability Codes	
Dist	Avail and/or Special
A-1	

ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: WILLIAM P. MARTINOUS, LTC, OD

TITLE: Playing To Win In Nicaragua

FORMAT: Individual Study Intended for Publication

DATE: 30 March 1988 PAGES: 20 CLASSIFICATION: Unclass.

The United States' objective in Nicaragua was the establishment of a democratic, pluralistic, stable and friendly government. What developed was the Sandinista regime, a Marxist totalitarian junta, hostile towards the United States and its interests. Now the United States is groping for a strategy to reverse past failures and achieve its original objective. This paper seeks to help in the search for that counter-strategy. It reviews the recent history of Nicaragua and identifies a need for a long-term, national commitment to counter the Sandinistas. The paper examines the current situation and identifies three strategic options. Next it highlights the advantages and disadvantages of each option. Then it compares the options according to their probability of success, cost and political acceptability. The paper concludes that the best available option to achieve the United States' objectives in Nicaragua is to support the Contras with a long-term, national commitment.

INTRODUCTION

For years the United States has tried to achieve its national objectives in Nicaragua. These objectives boil down to a democratic, pluralistic and stable Nicaraguan Government, friendly towards the United States. Our trial and error attempts have ranged from occupation to neglect. Yet, in the long run, none of these actions have worked for us. Now we find ourselves faced with an entrenched, pro-Soviet, communist government--the Sandinistas. This Marxist regime is the opposite of what we wanted to achieve. Its continued existence is testimony to the failure of our past policies toward Nicaragua.

The primary reason for our failure is our national reluctance to play to win in the long run. We face formidable opponents who have a well earned reputation for long-term strategic planning. Yet we inevitably try to counter their moves with short-term deals. As Jeane Kirkpatrick put it, they are playing to win and we want to get out of the game.¹ Our recent policies toward Nicaragua are excellent examples of our short-term thinking. During the period from 1978 to 1988 we have supported and later condemned the Somoza dictatorship, supported and later condemned the Sandinista regime, and then supported and later cutoff the rebels who oppose the Sandinistas. The results of our myopic efforts are short lived, requiring us to address the same problems again and again. In the past, the American people have been tolerant in supporting the inefficiencies

inherent in our short-term thinking. The fact that several American presidents were allowed to directly, and in some cases repeatedly, intervene in sovereign Central American countries is proof of that tolerance. Today, however, the political and economic costs of intervening in another nation's internal affairs are becoming increasingly expensive. The repetitive costs generated by our short-term strategies are exceeding what the American people seem willing to pay. As a result, our leaders are losing the support of our citizens.

Not only are our short term strategies becoming unaffordable they are also growing more ineffective. Our opponents are becoming adept at out-maneuvering us with their long-term strategies. For example, while we were quickly winning military battles in Vietnam, the North Vietnamese were slowly winning the psychological war in the rest of the world. Similarly, the Sandinistas patiently survived through years of confrontations with the militarily superior, U.S.-supported Nicaraguan National Guard. Once the United States withdrew its support the Sandinistas intensified their attacks against their weakened enemy.² This long-term strategy brought them to power.

Since the Sandinistas took control in Nicaragua, the United States has been groping for a counter-strategy. Without a well thought out long-term strategy our future efforts to reach our national objectives will fair no better than our past attempts. While our choices are limited, we still have options. The purpose of this paper is to help select the best option. It will

outline the current situation in Nicaragua and compare the strategic options available to the United States. Then it will recommend a long-term strategy for dealing with the Sandinista Government.

SANDINISTAS AND CONTRAS

The Sandinistas are a Marxist-Leninist junta. They cleverly linked their movement to Nicaragua's legendary hero, General Augusto Cesar Sandino, who led a guerrilla war against the United States' occupation of Nicaragua from 1927 to 1933. While his ideology was anti-interventionist, populist and reformist, he was not a Marxist.³ In fact, Sandino publicly separated himself from the communist movement when they tried to use him to further their own cause in Mexico.⁴ *AND IN EL SALVADOR HE WAS NOT*

Fifty years later, the Nicaraguan communist movement used both the Sandino name and legacy to seize power. Under the Sandinista banner, the communists lead the broad-based coalition that ousted the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza Debayle. Initially, the Sandinistas had no effective opposition in filling rapidly the power vacuum left by Somoza. As a result, they made significant progress in consolidating their control. In addition to their internal moves, they began to inspire and support communist insurgents in neighboring countries, most notably in El Salvador.⁵

The Sandinistas are now challenged by a group of Nicaraguan counterrevolutionaries known as the Nicaraguan Democratic Force

(FDN), or Contras. The Contras were organized by the United States in 1981.⁶ With United States support they have proven effective in disrupting the Sandinistas' consolidation of power. The Sandinistas have neither been able to defeat the Contras militarily nor stop Contra attacks against military and economic targets inside Nicaragua. In general, the Contras are growing in number, and becoming better trained and more aggressive.⁷ Their actions against the Sandinista Government have moved Nicaragua into a small but growing civil war. This war poses the first real threat to the Sandinista movement.⁸

THE PEACE PLAN DILEMMA

In an attempt to stop the fighting in Nicaragua and other Central American countries, five leaders of the region met in Guatemala in August 1987. Led by President Arias of Costa Rica, the group emerged with a mutually acceptable pact called the Guatemala Peace Plan. This Plan was signed by the presidents of Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua. The provisions of the plan require: (1) a cease-fire, general amnesty for political crimes, and dialogue between combatants; (2) democratization, including freedom of press and political pluralism; (3) free elections supervised by the Organization of American States; (4) promotion of social justice without foreign intervention; (5) a commitment by each country to prevent the use of its territories to destabilize other governments; (6) negotiations on the mutual reduction of troops and arms of each

country; and (7) immediate suspension of aid to insurgents and irregulars. The Plan also allows the present government of each country to remain in power through its current term.⁹ As applied to Nicaragua, the Sandinistas promise a gradual transformation from communism to democracy in return for an immediate end of outside support for the Contras. The Reagan Administration is leery of the "pay now, change later" deal with the Sandinistas. The Administration's opponents want to accept the deal in good faith.

Before we can consider how best to achieve our objective in Nicaragua, we must make sure we agree on that objective. While stated in different terms, both the Reagan Administration and its political opposition profess a common, primary objective. That objective is the establishment of a democratic form of government that allows the Nicaraguan people to exercise their right to self-determination.¹⁰ For the purpose of this discussion, let us accept this worthwhile, common goal as the primary objective of the United States.

Although they agree on an objective, the political debate rages over the best method to reach it. The Administration is convinced that the only way to bring democracy to Nicaragua is to replace the Sandinista Government. This exorcism can take place by ousting the Sandinistas directly, or by forcing them into a truly representative coalition.¹¹ Either way, the Administration sees a well supported Contra force as the key to reach the objective. They insist that failure to support the Contras will destroy Contra morale, cohesion and viability. They

warn that once the Contras disband, it will be impossible to bring them back together.¹² In contrast, the Administration's opponents believe the Sandinistas should be allowed the opportunity to lead the transition to a more democratic form of government. They insist that the Sandinistas have made a moral obligation to the world. They cite the Sandinistas' promise to meet the provisions of the Guatemala Peace Plan in return for the end of outside support for the Contras. They want to give the Sandinistas the opportunity to live up to that obligation.¹³ The opposition reasons that the failure of the United States to end Contra aid will give the Sandinistas an excuse to renege on their commitment to democracy.¹⁵ Basically, they want to test the sincerity of the Sandinistas before resorting to the Contra option. But the cost of the test may be the viability of the Contra option. Consequently, there may be no real penalty to impose if the Sandinistas decide to fail the test.

A MATTER OF TRUST

The key to solving the dilemma is accurately predicting whether the Sandinistas will comply with the provisions of the Guatemala Plan. If the Sandinistas plan to renege, the Reagan Administration is endorsing the best method to reach our objective. If the Sandinistas are trustworthy, the opposition's method is the best.

To predict the sincerity of the Sandinistas we will examine their past and determine the original agenda they established for

their regime. Where they were going should provide an idea of their real vision for Nicaragua and where eventually they will try to lead it. We will also review their compliance with previous agreements to get an indication of their past trustworthiness. Finally, we will evaluate recent Sandinista actions concerning implementation of the Guatemala Plan. This evaluation should provide an indication of their sincerity in supporting it.

When the Sandinistas came to power in 1979 there was no effective internal opposition to their rule. They also enjoyed widespread domestic and international support. In July 1979 the United States started shipments of emergency food and medicine to Nicaragua. In the third week of the Sandinistas' rule, the United States alone provided \$8 million in aid.¹⁵ In the first 18 months the United States provided \$118 million in out-right grants and loans.¹⁶ The Inter-American Development Bank loaned Nicaragua \$141 million. Likewise, the World Bank loaned them \$60 million.¹⁷ Several western countries offered medical teams, teachers and military training programs to assist the new Nicaraguan Government with its legitimate needs. The United States offered to conduct military training programs for Nicaraguans at bases in Panama. It also offered military medical teams for remote Nicaraguan communities.¹⁸ Other countries--Mexico, Germany, and Spain--made contributions in both people and money.¹⁹

The Sandinistas response to western support was a steady march towards communism and totalitarianism. In the words of

Jamie Wheelock, the Sandinista Minister of Agriculture, they used "the money of the imperialists to build socialism."²⁰ Within six weeks of taking power, Daniel Ortega, now the Sandinista President, was firmly aligned with Fidel Castro. At a meeting of nonaligned nations, Ortega assisted in an effort to bring the nonaligned movement into the open embrace of the Soviet bloc. Within eight months the Sandinistas signed a party-to-party accord with the Soviet Communist Party. Ortega subsequently signed a joint communique that tracked closely with Soviet policy.²¹

In order to consolidate internally, the Sandinistas increased the size of their standing army to approximately 35,000 soldiers.²² They armed them with Soviet weapons, and secretly imported 30 Soviet T55 tanks.²³ They also welcomed more than 8,000 Cuban, Russian, East European, Libyan and Palestine Liberation Organization civilian and military advisers.²⁴ They openly supported the communist insurgents in El Salvador by allowing the insurgents to establish a headquarters in Managua. Later they secretly pumped weapons to the Salvadoran insurgents.²⁵ They unilaterally restructured the Nicaraguan Council of State and gave themselves the majority of voting members.²⁶ The Sandinistas began to consolidate their control over every aspect of Nicaraguan life. They took over the television stations, censored the press and radio, and harassed their political opposition.²⁷ Finally, they ordained themselves as the sole "Vanguard" to determine what was best for the Nicaraguan people.²⁸ The Sandinistas' march toward

communism was so unmistakable that the Carter Administration suspended American assistance long before the Contras existed.²⁹ Their past actions leave little doubt as to where the Sandinistas would like to lead Nicaragua. In the words of President Ortega the Sandinistas are "profoundly anti-imperialist, anti-yankee and Marxist-Leninist."³⁰

While following their own agenda, the Sandinistas made several notable agreements under strikingly similar conditions to the Guatemala Peace Plan. In each case they were faced with a threat and made a deal to counter that threat. In 1979 they gave written assurances to the Organization of American States (OAS) that they would hold free elections and promote a pluralistic political system. In return, they asked the OAS not interfere in their consolidation of power.³¹ In 1980 they entered into a written agreement with a coalition of Nicaraguan businessmen, the COSEP, promising to establish a reasonable timetable for free elections by July 19, 1980. The price for this concession was the COSEP's commitment not to fight the restructuring of the Council of State or disrupt the upcoming planting season.³² On numerous occasions they promised their followers they would "never under any circumstances hold talks" with the Contras.³³ In exchange for this promise the junta demanded the unquestionable support of their followers. The Sandinistas broke all three agreements, even the one to their own followers. Apparently they keep commitments only until it is both safe and in the best interest of the junta to do otherwise.

But what about this latest agreement? Have the Sandinistas

changed? They have taken well publicized steps to comply with the Guatemala Plan. But these steps appear less impressive under closer scrutiny. With much fanfare they have eased their censorship of the news by allowing one opposition newspaper and one independent radio station to reopen. However, the Sandinistas maintained control of all television stations. They continue to intimidate and harass the staff of the opposition newspaper. And they limit the independent radio station to equipment that restricts its broadcast to a small portion of the capital city.³⁴ They appointed their outspoken domestic critic, Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, as a voting member of the committee charged with overseeing compliance with the Peace Plan. But it is a four member committee and the other three voting members are pro-Sandinista.³⁵ They announced the restoration of civil liberties by lifting the official state of emergency. On that same day they arrested and interrogated five highly visible critics of their policies.³⁶ While they did release 981 political prisoners, thousands more remain in jail.³⁷ They offered amnesty for 3,500 additional political prisoners, but only if they are accepted by the United States and leave Nicaragua.³⁸ In spite of their public commitments, the Sandinistas have missed the first two deadlines for complying with the provisions of the Guatemala Plan.³⁹ They are now waiting for the termination of all outside aid to the Contras while still advocating their "total defeat."⁴⁰

More recently, we got a glimpse of the Sandinistas' future intentions from the debriefing of a high-level Sandinista

officer. Prior to his defection, Major Roger Miranda served as Chief of Staff to Humberto Ortega, the Sandinistan Defense Minister. Miranda has reinforced the charge that the Sandinistas agreed to the Guatemala Peace Plan for the sole purpose of stopping the Contras.⁴¹ He detailed the efforts of the Sandinistas to train Salvadoran rebels to use shoulder fired ground-to-air missiles. He revealed that hundreds of Sandinistan Army officers are being trained in Cuba and the Soviet Union in the use of sophisticated weapon systems.⁴² He also disclosed plans to increase the Sandinistan Armed Forces to 600,000 men--virtually the entire population of adult males in the country.⁴³ Two of Miranda's accusations--the planned increase in the size of the Nicaraguan Army and the training of Sandinistan officers to use sophisticated weapons--were surprisingly confirmed by Humberto Ortega at a December 1987 news conference in Managua.⁴⁴ The planned increase in the size of the Nicaraguan Army and continued assistance to leftist insurgents are in direct conflict with the provisions of the Guatemala Plan.

The Sandinistas original agenda for Nicaragua was a steady march toward communism. Along the way they established a solid track record for making and later breaking their commitments. Their current actions to comply with the terms of the Guatemala Peace Plan appear superficial and easily reversible. In addition, there is excellent intelligence that indicates the Sandinistas agreed to the Guatemala Plan to emasculate the Contras. There is also evidence that they apparently do not

intend to meet two of the major provisions mandated by the Plan. In view of these facts, it seems prudent for the United States to assume that the Sandinistas will not voluntarily comply with the provisions of the Guatemala Peace Plan. The remainder of this paper will be based on that assumption.

THE STRATEGIC OPTIONS

If the Sandinistas do not intend to comply, what can be their strategy for pretending to implement the Peace Plan? An obvious answer is that they are making temporary short-term concessions for real long-term gains. The concessions include negotiating with the Contras, improving their record on human rights, easing their oppression of their political opposition, allowing some freedom of speech, and reducing the visibility of their support to other communist insurgents in Central America. For making these concessions the Sandinistas stay in power and maintain control of Nicaragua, remove the Contra threat through political means, and ease the tremendous political and economic pressure from the West. These trade-offs allow the Sandinistas precious time and room to further consolidate their power. Meanwhile, they wait for a more favorable environment to return to their previous agenda. The Sandinistas appear to be using a long-term strategy to circumvent the short-term deal made directly with their neighbors and indirectly with the United States.

The challenge of the United States is to develop and

implement a long-term national strategy to counter this very plausible Sandinista plan. Our strategy must meet our ultimate objective of self-determination for the Nicaraguan people. It must also meet the complimentary short-term objective of containing the Sandinista threat until it can be countered. Our strategy must also be effective, affordable and supportable by the majority of the American people.

The United States has three strategic options in dealing with the Sandinistas: do nothing, support the Contras, or intervene directly with United States military force. We will review the benefits and costs of each of these options.

Our first option is to do nothing and hope the Sandinistas will self-destruct. This strategy has several advantages, beginning with its extremely low cost, at least initially. It avoids both domestic and international political complications, again in the short term. Doing nothing allows the United States to take what many consider to be the moral high ground. Returning to this position could enhance our ability to use diplomatic, economic and sociopsychological instruments of power to contain the Sandinistas. Finally, it would provide an excellent example of the inherent weakness of the communist economic system. If the Sandinistas should self-destruct, so much the better.

Doing nothing also has some significant disadvantages. The greatest of these is that it is likely to achieve neither short- nor long-term objectives. The combination of a large army and outside communist support could allow the Sandinistas to

consolidate their control of Nicaragua for the foreseeable future. This option puts time on the side of the Sandinistas. The longer they remain in control, the stronger they become, and the less likely their collapse or removal. This strategy also reduces the Soviet\Cuban cost of supporting the Sandinista Government while improving their prospects of making real gains. These gains include expansion of communism in the Western hemisphere, diversion of American attention and resources from other parts of the world, access to new intelligence gathering bases, and use of excellent staging areas for other communist insurgencies. Doing nothing makes the United States appear unwilling or unable to stop the spread of communism, even in its own "backyard." This appearance of impotence could encourage communist expansion in other parts of the Americas. Finally, doing nothing puts the United States in a very poor position to influence the type of government that would replace the Sandinistas if they should collapse.

Our second option is to continue to support the Contras. This strategy has many distinct advantages. First, it is relatively inexpensive in terms of American lives and dollars. Second, it gives the United States a moral justification--supporting a legitimate combatant in a civil war--for being involved in Nicaragua. This arrangement amounts to taking the moral middle ground, on the spectrum of current American opinion, and complements the use of other instruments of power. Third, it keeps effective economic and military pressure on the Sandinistas. This pressure has several benefits. It makes

continued Soviet/Cuban support of the Sandinistas much more expensive. The communists must not only subsidize the faltering Nicaraguan economy, but also fund the counterinsurgency effort. In addition, attacking the Sandinistas within Nicaragua keeps their focus inward. Thus, it reduces their ability to meddle in the affairs of their neighbors. Fourth, it makes continued Soviet support of the Sandinistas a seemingly endless, expensive and risky proposition. The combination of the Sandinista's demonstrated economic incompetence and continued Contra resistance could prevent the communists from consolidating their power in Nicaragua for years. This situation could prevent Soviet exploitation of Nicaragua as a base of operations while costing them millions of dollars a year to prop up the Sandinistas. In contrast to the first option, this strategy puts time on our side. The Soviets are already supporting one expensive Latin American social experiment in Cuba. They do not appear overly anxious to fund yet another unless the benefits far out weigh the risks.⁴⁵ Fifth, this strategy demonstrates United States resolve to fight the spread of communism and, if successful, would represent a significant defeat to the communist world. Such a defeat could demoralize other communist insurgencies. Sixth, backing the Contras puts the United States in an excellent position to influence the type of government that would follow the Sandinistas if they are defeated.

Supporting the Contras is not without potential cost and risks. The first disadvantage is it gives the Sandinistas excuses for many of their actions. For example, they can use the

civil war to excuse their poor economic performance. They can also use the Contra threat to justify maintaining or increasing the size of their large standing army, as well as the continued presence of Cubans, Soviets and other communist advisors.

Another disadvantage is the prospect of the civil war dragging on inconclusively for years. If not handled properly, the idea of an endless war in Central America could be used to sway American opinion against continued United States' support. Yet another and most troublesome disadvantage is the risk that the Sandinistas might defeat the Contras. This possibility would place the United States in the position of having to choose between abandoning its objective in Nicaragua or getting directly involved militarily. However, those are the only other options now available to the United States. Also, the inability of the Sandinistas to defeat the Contras in six years makes their sudden collapse unlikely.

The third option is direct military intervention by the United States. The big advantage of this option is a swift, effective removal of the Sandinistan Government. In addition, the United States could control the type of government that replaced the Sandinistas. Another advantage of direct action is a strong signal to the world that the United States will not tolerate the spread of communism to the mainland of the Americas.

The disadvantages of direct United States intervention are as dramatic as the advantages. The biggest disadvantage is the high cost in terms of American lives and dollars. Another significant cost is the avalanche of international and domestic

criticism the invasion would be sure to generate. The United States would have great difficulty in justifying its action. This lack of legitimacy runs the distinct risk of alienating most of the Nicaraguan people, not to mention the rest of Latin America and the world. The combination of loss of life, lack of legitimacy and international criticism could cause a storm of protest in the United States. In addition, this option could lead to a requirement for a long-term occupation of Nicaragua. It is quite conceivable that a sizeable Sandinista force could escape into the countryside and launch a guerrilla war. Also, there is the possibility that Sandinistas would remain in the Nicaraguan cities and use terrorist tactics to harass United States occupation forces. Under such scenarios the United States could end up in a situation similar to the Israelis in Lebanon or the Soviets in Afghanistan.

Now that we have identified the primary advantages and disadvantages of the three options, we can compare them. Our criteria for comparison are: probability of success, cost and political acceptability.

In terms of success, option one--do nothing--is the least likely to meet either short- or long-term objectives. This option is the ultimate short-term strategy which leaves the fate of the Nicaraguan people to chance. In effect, it removes the United States as an effective player in Nicaragua and could diminish our effectiveness throughout the world. Doing nothing gives the perception that we are becoming a declining superpower. A superpower too absorbed in our own problems to concern

ourselves with the distant and taxing issue of promoting democracy and social justice in less developed parts of the world. Such a perception, regardless of the facts, encourages our opponents to test our will with successively stronger challenges elsewhere. The longer these challenges go unanswered, the greater the cost of our eventual response. Option two--support the Contras--has met our short-term objective of containing the Sandinistas. In addition, it has the potential to meet our long-term objectives of self-determination for the Nicaraguan people. This option has excellent long-term, strategic possibilities. Option three--direct intervention by the United States--immediately meets our short-term objective and could meet our long-term objective if we were allowed to pursue it to its completion.

In direct, short-term cost, option one is by far the least expensive. Option two costs more than option one, but is still relatively inexpensive. Option three, however, is prohibitively expensive under current and foreseeable circumstances.

In the area of political acceptability, option one is the most acceptable, at least in the short term. Option two is politically acceptable to approximately twenty-six percent of United States citizens.⁴⁶ This acceptability could be improved by convincing the American people of the necessity for continued United States support of the Contras. The potential for generating increased support was demonstrated when Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North testified before the Iran-Contra Hearings. After Colonel North's testimony, the percentage of American

people who approved of United States' support of the Contras increased to approximately thirty-eight percent. Another nineteen to twenty-four percent were undecided.⁴⁷ In the countries of Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, where the Sandinista threat is better understood, the approval rate for United States' support of the Contras exceeds fifty percent.⁴⁸ Option three is politically unacceptable and the prospects for improving its acceptability are abysmal.

CONCLUSION

Supporting the Contras is a realistic, economical, politically feasible course of action. It has few real costs and great potential for payoffs. The fact that it has worked, in spite of what Lieutenant Colonel North has accurately described as our "fickle, vacillating, unpredictable, on-again, off-again," support is an indication of its exceptional durability and utility.⁴⁹ It has achieved our short-term objective of containing the Sandinistas. If properly supported, it has the potential to achieve our long-term goal. Indeed, the strength of this option is its durability and adaptability. It can be scaled back when conditions are unfavorable and expanded when conditions improve. Since it costs our opponents five to ten times more than it costs us, time works to our advantage and adds to our leverage. While this option has risks, they appear manageable and acceptable.

The Contra option gives us the means to achieve our objective in Nicaragua. What we must add to these means is our long-term, national commitment to play to win.

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